




Is There Room for Ethical Consumers on the Finnish Political Spectrum?

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Abstract

This paper examines ethical consumption by comparing attitudes between different political party supporters. In recent consumer theories, it is argued that individualistic choices are more important than collective and structural interests. However, shared opinions, norms, and beliefs continue to influence consumer attitudes. This is particularly true when analysing attitudes concerning the use of consumer markets for ethical purposes. Accordingly, we argue that personal political preference is a highly effective factor when comparing citizens' ethical consumption orientations. We also assume that the diffusion of ethical concern over consumption has blurred the differences between parties. To test these assumptions, we utilized data derived from comparable nationwide surveys collected in Finland in 1999 ($N=2,492$), 2004 ($N=3,448$), 2009 ($N=1,202$), and 2014 ($N=1,351$). All samples consist of respondents aged 18 to 74 years, thus providing an extensive look at the phenomenon. The analysis focuses on differences in ethical consumer orientation between adherents of different political parties as well as temporal changes in these associations. Our findings confirm the assumption that ethical consumer orientation is strongly associated with citizens' political preference. However, on the basis of temporal analysis, we also found that party differences have narrowed as the differences between the Greens and other parties have declined during the survey period. Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of understanding how citizens' political preference is embedded in way of life and point out new considerations that are fruitful for a clearer understanding of ethical consumption.

Keywords Ethical consumer attitudes · Party affiliation · Finland · Survey

Many activities in contemporary society can be regarded as consumption: Things are bought and sold in the market, and the principles of the market economy control these activities. Recent worries about environmental risks and the effects of globalization may have helped put consumption on the ethical agenda, but consumption as a space for ethics is no news. Consumption is inherently a moral matter. It always involves considerations of group versus

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self-interest and fairness (Wilk 2001, p. 246) and has a history of being used as a tool in striving for the common good.

As society has shifted from the industrial to the post-industrial phase, consumption is increasingly about lifestyle choices and political statements, instead of just satisfying needs (Clark 2003; Inglehart and Welzel 2005, p. 33; Warde 2015). Consumption is used to make oneself more attractive to a desired social group in seeking acceptance, and people attempt to communicate more than ever through consumption in terms of self-presentation and self-image management (e.g., Featherstone 2007). People in post-industrial societies have developed new and more sophisticated consumption attitudes and habits: Contemporary consumption is increasingly based on self-expression and ideological determinants than a position on social strata (Inglehart and Welzel 2005, pp. 104–105). This holds especially true with regard to ethical consumption (Adams and Raisborough 2008; Rössel and Schenk 2017).

Previous studies have shown how political party identification influences people's attitudes and behaviour on various issues, such as ethical ideology (Van Kenhove et al. 2001) and consumption habits (Clements 2012; Koivula et al. 2017). However, the connection of ethical consumption with party preference remains a less studied theme. In this study, we argue that citizens' political preferences can explain ethical consumer attitudes. In order to test our proposition, we look into the variation of ethical consumer attitudes by citizens' party identification. Our data come from four repeated and nationally representative cross-sectional surveys collected in Finland over the 1999–2014 time period.

Our research context is a relatively affluent society, where people have opportunities to draw on value orientations in their consumption and voice their ethical, environmental, and political concerns on the market (Koos 2012). More generally, Finland is a Nordic welfare society which is commonly characterized by a high-quality education system, a stable political system, equality between sexes, low rates of poverty, and small income disparities (e.g., Esping-Andersen 1990; Pfau-Effinger 2017). However, during our observation period, Finland faced a long-term economic downturn as a part of the international financial crisis (Gulan et al. 2014). In addition, the period also witnessed remarkable changes in the political sphere due to the weakening of left-wing parties and the rise of the national conservative populist party, the Finns (Karvonen et al. 2016). These societal disruptions give us a fertile ground to explore the link between political ideology and the ethical consumer attitudes of citizens and their temporal alterations. The paper sets off with a discussion on the concept of ethical consumption and the development of ethical consumption, which is followed by an elaboration of the multidimensional relation between attitudes, orientations, and consumer behaviour. After that, we point out why political preference in particular should be considered an important ideological factor when examining ethical consumption. This is followed by an introduction to our empirical research design and a presentation of our results. We conclude with a discussion on the association between party identification and consumer orientation.

The Rise of Ethical Consumption

A commonly accepted version of the history of modern consumer activism states consumer activism has emerged in waves. Consumers have voiced their concerns by founding co-operatives, by forming consumer organizations demanding value for money, and by Naderist activism fighting big businesses for consumer protection. What we term ethical consumption is

considered the fourth wave of consumer activism. It has its roots in grassroots environmental movements in the late 1970s (Gabriel and Lang 1995).

Ethical consumption spread and accelerated quickly in the 1980s. Littler (2011, p. 30), for example, considers ethical consumption “emerged as a reaction to the Reagan and Thatcher years” and links the popular use of the term ethical consumption to a form of moral crisis “propelled by global neoliberal consumer capitalism and ecological catastrophe.” The fact that we describe some consumption as ethical means there is a widespread understanding that there is something immoral and problematic about contemporary consumer culture and points to our collective failure to deal with these problems (Littler 2009). Ethical consumption may thus be regarded as distinct from earlier forms of activism in that it is “particularly oriented to the contemporary moment and its problematization of living” (Lewis and Potter 2011, p. 5). While consumers of the second and third waves of consumer activism were focused on improving markets and making them safer, the fourth wave has its origins in concern that collective consumption patterns are unsustainable (Johnston 2008, p. 238).

It can also be argued that ethical consumption has become less organised than earlier efforts, to the point of being described as individualized collective action (Micheletti 2003). The actions of consumers are less organised and indeed more individualized and varied. Moreover, the issues that consumer actions are directed towards have expanded in range and multitude. At the same time, ethical consumption has arguably become a more mainstream, acceptable consumer identity. Ethical consumers are no longer confined to stereotypes of radical environmental activists or moralising “eco-nutters,” and for example, Finnish youth do not perceive a contradiction between materialism and environmental principles (Autio and Wilska 2003). As an example of changing consumption patterns, the global sales of organic products increased fivefold between 1997 and 2009 (Stolle and Micheletti 2013, pp. 54–55).

Ethical Consumption as Action, Orientations, and Attitudes

According to Lury (2011, p. 177), “ethical consumption emerges in a broad spectrum of practices, organizations and initiatives, and addresses a wide range of issues, including working conditions, fair trade, animal welfare, and environmental concerns.” Ethical consumption is often used as a convenient catch-all phrase, an umbrella term which bundles together diverse actions conducted for a myriad of reasons towards a multitude of goals. To unravel this bundle, it may be useful to disentangle the different actions consumers can take to when they are dissatisfied (Lewis and Potter 2011).

Firstly, consumers can use their *voice* and demand change through disseminating discourses and applying pressure. Secondly, they may *exit*; withdraw from consuming as in the case of boycotts. Third, they can use their *loyalty*, that is boycott; vote by their wallets (Micheletti 2003, p. 25, applying ideas from Hirschman 1970). While contested and fluid, the term ethical consumption tends to particularly lend itself to what Micheletti terms loyalty and Littler defines as “using purchasing power to sanction goods which have not been produced through exploitative conditions, however, those conditions are defined” (Littler 2009, p. 7). Noteworthy is that this definition allows that the interests that bring ethical consumption about may be highly diverse and difficult if not impossible to entangle. When people pay a premium for a commodity, the production of which involves less exploitation than other alternatives and it is not always clear whether they are doing this to reduce exploitation per se. For example, a consumer may be morally invested in the welfare of animals, while another consumer believes

it to be right to consume environmentally friendly and organic produce to stay fit and healthy, and someone else is mainly interested in product quality. People may even engage in the same practice motivated by quite opposite concerns: Consider someone choosing nationally produced goods motivated by concern for working conditions in developing countries versus someone making the same choice motivated by nationalism. Hence, consumption may even be used to advance undemocratic goals (Koos 2012).

It is also useful to see that ethical consumption is fundamentally distinct from anti-consumerist movements, such as voluntary simplicity, in that rather than resisting and criticizing the “consumer” persona, such a character is embraced, developed, and governed (Barnett et al. 2011). An ethical consumer attitude thus involves *the inclination to view consumption as ethically problematic* as the production of some goods and services involves exploitation *and the tendency that such problems can be solved with purchasing*. As such, ethical consumer attitudes do not necessarily stand in opposition to market-liberal ideologies.

Consumer attitudes have an impact on how individuals orientate towards consumer activities. Yet, individuals’ ethical attitudes and orientations do not straightforwardly lead to ethical consumer behaviour. Attitudes do, of course, to a varying extent also relate to actual consumption practices (Ajzen 2008). However, while private consumption may be seen as an act, consumer attitudes represent something that is a social condition or even a way of life. As such, consumer attitudes reflect at least as much people’s lifestyles and social context as they reflect people’s actualized consumption (e.g., Räsänen 2003; Vermeir and Verbeke 2006).

In general, people state they care about social and environmental issues and express a willingness to consume ethically, but when it comes to actually make choices, few are ready to sacrifice function or pay more even when presented comprehensive information about the damaging and exploitative conditions behind products (Devinney et al. 2010). It appears that “morals stop at the pocketbook” (Eckhardt et al. 2010, p. 430). This “attitude-behaviour gap” has perplexed scholars, and a great deal of research has been done to understand it (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Carrington et al. 2016; Newholm and Shaw 2007). However, this gap is only perplexing if we regard the consumer as a rational decision maker who acts the same way in the marketplace as outside it (Carrington et al. 2016). The gap seizes to puzzle us if indeed we consider that consumer attitudes represent something that is a social condition or even a desired way of life.

Whereas in the past ethical consumption has been considered worthy, moralizing, and restricting (Littler 2009, pp. 16–17), and in a sense positioned outside the romantic ethic of modern consumerism (Campbell 2005), some scholars suggest ethical consumption is becoming an increasingly acceptable source of social identity. Ethical commodities are imbued with highly valued cultural attributes such as authenticity (Binkley 2009; Carfagna et al. 2014), purity (Cairns et al. 2013; Ulver-Sneistrup et al. 2011), and, what is particular, in the case of foodstuffs, they are associated with health (Johnston and Baumann 2010; Pelozo et al. 2015; Schuldt et al. 2012).

Such associations, along with the fact that ethical products tend to be more expensive, also make ethical consumption suitable for signalling status. However, while ethical consumption may be regarded as a way for the middle classes to distinguish themselves and express respectability, it is also worth noting that “middle-class sneering at ethical consumption is (...) as much a phenomenon as middle-class sneering-at-others through ethical consumption” (Littler 2011, p. 35). The point Littler makes is that ethical consumption cannot be reduced to middle-class distinction, not only because it is indeed endorsed beyond the middle classes but importantly also because it may provoke antagonism even within the middle classes.

The rise of ethical consumption coincides with the rise of subpolitics and lifestyle-politics on one hand and a decline in more traditional forms of political participation on the other. This has led some scholars to question whether ethical “consumer-citizens” are abandoning traditional politics and turning to the market to air their political views. However, this does not seem to be the case. Instead, it appears ethical consumption complements rather than substitutes more traditional forms of political participation (Baumann et al. 2015; Rössel and Schenk 2017; Willis and Schor 2012). Some evidence, though, suggests ethical consumers may be less trusting towards governmental institutions (Summers 2016). It has also been suggested that ethical consumption is associated with social capital and perhaps more related to civic engagement than necessarily political (de Zúñiga et al. 2014; Neilson and Paxton 2010). Next, we discuss more specifically how political ideology may be seen as a significant factor behind consumer attitudes.

The Impact of Political Background

As elsewhere in Western Democracies, class voting has traditionally been common in Finland but has diminished in recent decades, while the influence of post-materialist values—such as minority rights and environmentalism—on political preference has increased (Knutsen 2017). Nowadays, the party divide in society may be regarded as a reflection of the disparity trends on the individual level and party positions. Citizens have increasingly become independent participators who engage not only in party politics but also seek out more informal ways to participate (Bennett 2012; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000).

Individuals choose the political party in which they most closely identify their life choices and interests (e.g., Goren 2005; Greene 2004; Koivula et al. 2017). As such, political preference is still constructed socially, since it is as a result of not only personal interest but also the adoption of different cultural values and views (e.g., Verba et al. 2005). Individuals generally categorize themselves through social comparisons between groups and by applying group norms and beliefs for understanding societal contexts (Festinger 1954). In this sense, political preference also provides a potential social collective which can be used in analyses of group response to various phenomena.

Identification with a political party forms a starting point of reference from which to understand contrasting views and factors linked to the way people categorize themselves (Jacoby 1988; Brader et al. 2013). Campbell et al. (1960) presented already in the 1960s that party identification forms a lens through which individuals evaluate the adequacy of different issues concerning their own orientation. In this case, the party functions as a useful guideline that affects individuals’ decision-making even when individuals do not have enough information about the phenomenon of interest (Jacoby 1988).

Following this idea, it has been found that citizens use political parties as their reference groups in forming opinions, orientations, and attitudes (Brader et al. 2013; Goren 2005; Linde 2018). On the other hand, this mechanism can also function in the opposite direction: Citizens are prone to realign their opinions in relation to counter political ideologies (Goren et al. 2009). Expanding these findings to ethical consumer attitudes, political preference is indicated to be associated with citizens’—at least self-reported—ethical ideology (Van Kenhove et al. 2001), consuming habits (Clements 2012; Koivula et al. 2017), and environmental attitudes (Cruz 2017).

The Finnish Political Context

The social and behavioural mechanisms of political preference depend on the research context (Bendor et al. 2011). The political spectrum of Finland is different from that of the United States of America (USA), on which, for example, Campbell et al. (1960) based their findings. This study focuses on the supporters of the six largest parties in Finland, namely the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the National Coalition Party (NCP), the Centre Party (Centre), the Greens (Greens), the Finns Party (Finns), and the Left Alliance (Left).

Party choice in the Finnish multiparty system has seen a remarkable shift as new political values have recently been highlighted (Knutsen 2017; Kriesi 2010). The diffusion of post-material values has played a key role in this change. Post-materialism is related to valuing non-material goals like self-expression, minority rights, and environmentalism (Inglehart 1990, 1997).

In Finland, the Greens has had a significant role in the popularization of ethical consumption issues. The party was founded by the activists who played key roles in the so-called Kojjärvi movement which brought environmental activists together in 1979 (see, Kontinen 1999; Mickelsson 2015). The movement was critical of consumer society and connected questions of environmental conservation and global distribution of material welfare to that critique (Järvikoski 1981).

Since then, environmental issues have become mainstream in political discourse, and the Greens has emphasized other post-materialistic values, without stressing common class interests or taking an apparent position on the left–right scale (Mickelsson 2015; Saarinen et al. 2018). The Left also puts a strong emphasis on post-materialistic values and acts concerning, for example, gender equality, tolerance, and minority rights (Eskelinen 2015; Karvonen 2014; Koivula et al. 2018). Hence, the Left has, along with the Greens, been characterized as “new left” party (e.g., Knutsen 1998).

The intergenerational shift towards post-materialist values has also given rise to a counter-revolutionary backlash among people who are actively rejecting these rising values and instead support neoconservative values fostering nativism, authoritarianism, and nostalgia for past society (Inglehart and Norris 2017). Following this, it is not surprising that the populist and neoconservative party The Finns have gained significant electoral success during the past decade in Finland.

Before the rise of the “new” parties, “old” parties, the NCP, the SDP, and the Centre, were the largest parties for over three decades, leaving a significant mark on the Finnish political system. These traditional parties are still in the political core, making the Finnish political spectrum strongly formed around different group-based class interests (Karvonen 2014). The centre-left-wing party SDP still represents the interests of workers and their unions, while the centre-right-wing NCP still has the most positive attitudes towards the interests of entrepreneurs and the upper strata. The Centre promotes the interests of farmers and other people living in rural regions (Karvonen 2014; Koironen et al. 2017).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

We argue that the political party preference of an individual manifests in individual consumer attitudes. It follows that information on political preference can be used in empirical analysis to understand attitudes and values that reflect lifestyle orientations. However, we are aware that

both ethical consumer attitudes and political preference are closely linked to many socio-demographic factors. It is also noteworthy that the political spectrum and consumption patterns are constantly changing. Based on these premises, we present the following research questions:

RQ1. How did political party preference associate with ethical consumer orientation in Finland in the time period between 1999 and 2014?

RQ2. How did socio-demographic factors confound and modify the effect of party preference?

RQ3. What kind of temporal changes were there between and within the party preference groups?

Previous studies have found that supporters of green parties are relatively ecological consumers (Kahn 2007) and hold post-materialistic values (Camcastle 2007). The Greens is generally perceived as the ecological party in the Finnish political context (Bolin 2016; Saarinen et al. 2018). In addition, the Left increasingly emphasises environmental issues alongside defending interests of the working class (Karvonen 2014). In this respect, we hypothesize:

H1: Those who have a preference for Greens and the Left report higher scores on ethical consumer orientation when compared to other party supporters.

Since opinions do not only arise from the influence of people's own reference groups but also as counter-reactions to groups with opposing opinions (e.g., Goren et al. 2009; Linde 2018), it can be assumed that green-minded consumer attitudes may cause an opposite reaction. Previous research suggests that right-wing populism has risen in the Western countries, in part as a cultural backlash against the proliferation of post-material values (Inglehart and Norris 2017). Accordingly, our second hypothesis is:

H2: Those with a preference for the nationalist conservative populist party, namely the Finns Party (Finns), are the least ethical consumer oriented.

The Coalition party has traditionally represented the interests of the upper classes and the party has widespread support among entrepreneurs and employers, whose values and attitudes may differ from those of socio-cultural professionals. Previous studies also suggest that NCP supporters report the highest spending on towards hedonistic and luxurious consumption (Koivula et al. 2017). In this respect, we hypothesize:

H3: Those with a preference for the National Coalition Party (NCP) report lower scores ethical consumer orientation than average.

In Finland, women are especially strongly represented within the Green party's supporters (Westinen 2015) and members (Saarinen et al. 2018), and Finnish women engage in boycotting and buycotting significantly more often than men (Stolle and Micheletti 2013). Previous studies have also suggested that ethical consumer attitudes are related to higher education, better income (Starr 2009), and older age (Hines and Ames 2000). These factors are

also important determinants behind citizens' political preference and party choice in Finland (e.g., Westinen 2015). Accordingly, we hypothesise:

H4: The association between political party preference and ethical consumer orientation is related to socio-demographic factors.

As post-materialist and environmental values have become more common (Inglehart 2008), and arguably ethical consumption has become a more acceptable source of social identity, ethical consumer attitudes may have generalised among the population and different parties. In addition, it has been suggested that sustainability remains an important political issue despite the rise of political conflicts related to post-materialist values and their counterforces (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Hence, our final hypothesis is:

H5: The differences between party supporters have generally narrowed during the observation period from 1999 to 2014.

Finally, we also acknowledge that the political sphere has changed during the last decade, as it has polarised into new cleavages. It is possible that these cleavages are increasingly based on post-materialistic values instead of structural characteristics or socio-economic values (e.g., Knutsen 2017). This phenomenon can have a confounding effect on temporal changes.

Data

Our data are derived from four cross-sectional mail surveys "Finland 1999, 2004, 2009, and 2014—Consumption and Way of Life." Each survey was based upon random samples of Finns aged 18 to 74. Representative samples were drawn from the Finnish-speaking population register database. Response rates varied from 61 (1999), 62 (2004), 49 (2009) to 46 (2014) percent, constituting the final samples with $n = 2,417$ (1999), $n = 3,574$ (2004), $n = 1,202$ (2009), and $n = 1,351$ (2014).

The Finland surveys supply a unique data that are particularly useful for the study of a variety of consumption-related issues while being representative of the Finnish-speaking adult population. While each survey includes questions about timely issues, core items have been included in the questionnaire each year, which offers possibilities for making reliable interpretations about the changes in public attitudes over time.

Despite the relatively modest response rates in terms of the newest datasets, the whole data with a total of 8544 respondents represent the Finnish population relatively well. In order to match the data to the Finnish population, variation in sample size and minor bias in terms of age and gender were corrected with adequate weight coefficients across different dataset (for more details, see Koivula et al. 2015).

Measures

In the analysis, we use consumer attitudes measuring ethical consumer orientation as our dependent variable. The data includes a Likert scale (1= Completely agree, 5= Completely disagree) battery of statements related to consumption and consumer attitudes. We formed a

compound variable according to the following statements asked in each survey: (1) I am worried about how my consumption affects the environment. (2) I consciously make environmentally friendly choices when consuming. (3) I worry about the origins of the food that is sold to consumers, as well as the health risks involved.

We argue this compound variable is relatively well suited to measuring attitudes towards ethical consumption. The items have to do with concern over the exploitative origins of commodities and enacting consumer choice-*loyalty*-to sanction goods the origins of which are less dubious. According to previous research, ethical concerns have particularly invaded the market for food, where healthiness, deliciousness, and political palatability of food easily go hand in hand (Johnston and Baumann 2010). The compound measure has adequate consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .65$), which also suggests the three items are closely related, thus offering us a feasible measure of ethical consumer orientation.

Figure 1 shows the temporal trend of how ethical consumer orientation has developed in Finland. It appears that there was a drop in ethical consumer concern from 1999 to 2004. After 2004, however, ethical consumer attitudes increased slightly. The situation did not change significantly between 2009 and 2014. This descriptive result serves as a starting point for our explanatory analysis.

Our central independent variable is political party preference. This variable measures the political party that respondents perceive to be the most important for them. Yearly frequencies are shown in Table 1. The data represents the power relations of parties in the Finnish parliament relatively well. In particular, the latest wave of the survey has captured the characteristics that have entered the field of party politics during recent years, namely that political decision-making is increasingly based on the policies of four middle-sized parties. The main sources of bias in the data are the distributions of the supporters from the Green League and the Left. The Greens seems to be very popular among our survey respondents as compared to the results of elections, whereas the Left is generally more popular in elections than in our surveys. There was a minor distribution of the supporters of the Christian

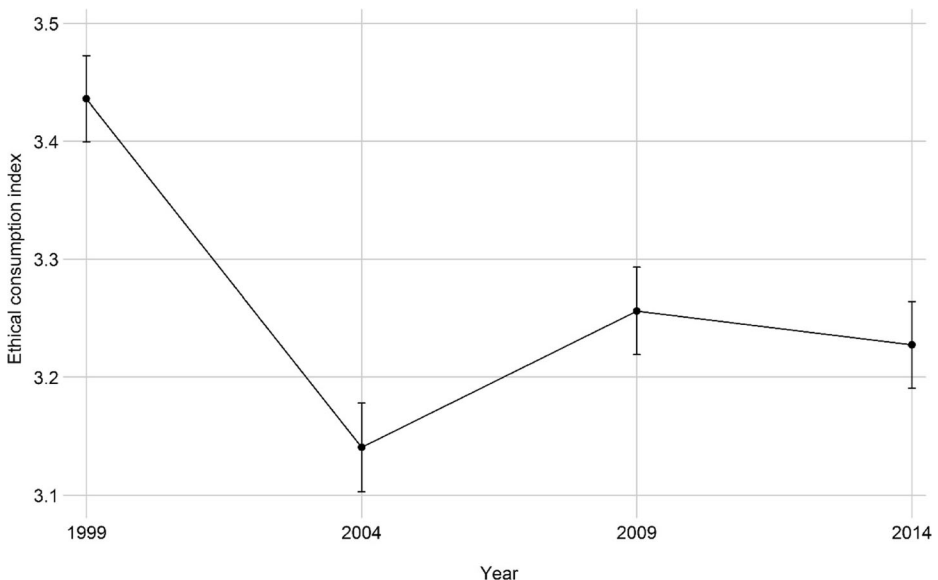


Fig. 1 Temporal changes in ethical consumption attitudes. Estimated means with 95% confidence intervals

Table 1 The most important parties in Finland, 1999–2014

	1999	2004	2009	2014	Total	<i>N</i>
The Centre of Finland (Centre)	17.0	20.8	15.2	17.1	18.4	1569
The Finns Party (Finns)	0.8	2.7	8.6	15.1	4.9	421
The National Coalition Party (NCP)	17.4	15.3	19.0	18.0	16.8	1437
The Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP)	22.7	24.8	19.2	16.4	22.1	1886
The Green League (Greens)	10.4	10.4	13.9	10.4	10.9	932
The Left Alliance (Left)	6.2	5.7	4.7	5.0	5.6	477
Other	9.3	13.9	12.3	11.0	11.9	1017
Nothing/refused	16.3	6.4	7.2	7.2	9.4	805

Democrats and the Swedish People's Party, which is why they are grouped into the "other" category.

Our control variables consist of age, education, occupation, and residential area. Age was used as a continuous variable. The education variable consisted of four categories according to ISCED classification, including "Primary," "Upper-secondary," "Tertiary," and "Master" degrees. Respondents' residential area was measured in the survey by asking respondents to choose from two options: "rural" or "urban." In order to measure respondents' economic activity, we observed respondents' current employment situation, options being "working" or "not working." Finally, we also controlled respondents' personal income as continuous variable. The descriptive statistics for applied background variables are provided in the Table 3 of the Appendix.

In the analysis, we first assessed to what extent party identification explains ethical consumer attitudes over time. After that, we fixed year variance by adding each year (excluding 1999) as dummy into the base model with dummies for each party. We omitted those who did not identify with any major party and held demographic variables constant. Finally, we conducted an analysis taking into account the temporal effects between parties by conducting interaction analysis between surveyed year and party identification.

Results

Figure 2 displays means for ethical consumer orientation for supporters of each party from 1999 and to 2014. Overall, these findings highlight the overall trend shown in Figure 1. However, here we can also witness some distinct trends among the parties examined. On one hand, those identifying with the NCP and the Greens show a similar trend with each other. There was a drop after 1999, after which scores have stayed at the same level. The Finns, on the other hand, show a clear increase in ethical consumer orientation each year after the 2004 drop. The supporters of Centre party were the clearest exception when compared to others, because their scores have declined throughout the time period covered.

The left-wing parties resemble each other to some degree. Among those identifying with the SDP and the Left, there was a slight rise in ethical concern after 2004 drop, which was followed by a slight drop again. In general, however, mean variation over time is very small among supporters of each party.

Table 2 shows results of two OLS regression models predicting ethical consumer orientation. In the first model, which includes the unadjusted effect of political party

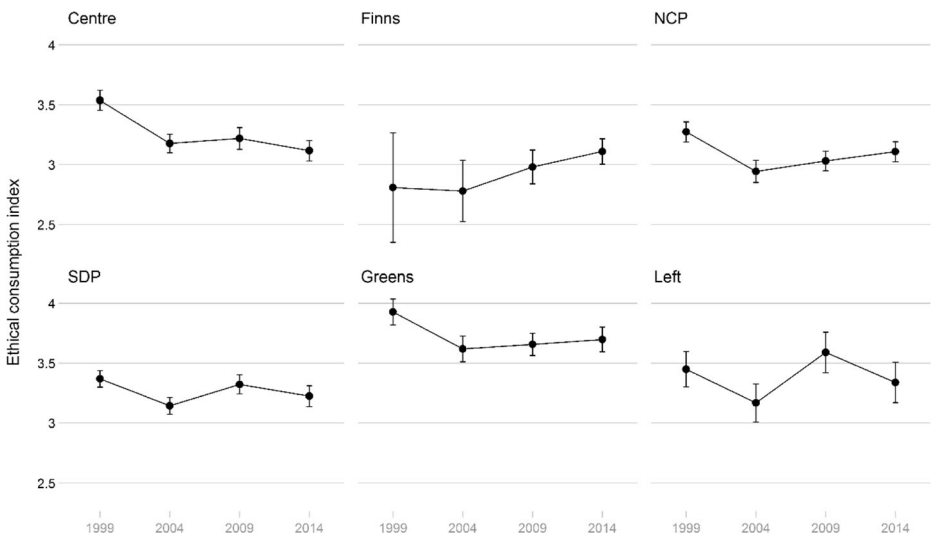


Fig. 2 Temporal changes in ethical consumption attitudes by party preference. Estimated means with 95% confidence intervals

Table 2 Predicting ethical consumption attitudes according to party preference and background variables

Variables	M1		M2		M3	
	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE
Party preference						
Centre	.061*	(.030)	-.000	(.033)	-.128	(.174)
Finns	-.156***	(.040)	-.043	(.043)	.090	(.203)
NCP	-.117***	(.030)	-.132***	(.032)	.186	(.176)
SDP	.055	(.029)	.030	(.032)	.000	(.169)
Greens	.514***	(.034)	.514***	(.036)	.605**	(.200)
Left	.170***	(.044)	.176***	(.048)	.147	(.276)
Omitted “nothing/refused”						
Control variables						
Female			.259***	(.020)	.221***	(.046)
Education: primary (omitted)						
Secondary			.050	(.032)	-.072	(.070)
Tertiary			.165***	(.034)	.247***	(.074)
Master			.277***	(.039)	.317***	(.091)
Resident area: urban			.147***	(.025)	.049	(.053)
Age (10 years)			.094***	(.009)	.130***	(.021)
Employment situation: working (omitted)						
Unemployed			.040	(.031)	.019	(.068)
Student			.136***	(.040)	.112	(.092)
Retired			.048	(.034)	-.058	(.080)
Income			.000	(.001)	-.002	(.002)
Constant	3.373***	(.025)	2.402***	(.060)	2.632***	(.116)
Interaction effects (party × control variables)						
Year fixed effects	No		No		Yes	
	Yes		Yes		Yes	
Observations	8,467		6,967		6,967	
R-squared	.060		.125		.141	

Standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

preference, we compare adherents of the six parties to those who do not report preference for any of them. In the second model, we add socio-demographic control variables into the equation. Finally, we take into account interaction effects of party preference and demographic variables. The effects in the models are fixed for yearly variation in the data sets. This procedure gives us a possibility to reliably interpret the average effects of each predictor over time.

As the first model indicates, respondents with a preference for the Greens report clearly the strongest ethical consumer orientation. The effect is notable when compared to all the other parties. Also, the effect of Left party indicates stronger scores, while the effect of identifying with the Centre party is barely significant. In addition, those who identify with the Finns and NCP express significantly weaker scores than others. Although the proportion of total variance accounted for is modest (6%), the result shows that party preference is clearly associated with the expressions of ethical consumer attitudes.

The second model shows the findings after the effects of socio-demographic control variables have been adjusted for. Some notable changes in the effect of political party preference can be observed although the effects are generally very similar compared to the first model. Those with a preference for the Greens express the highest ethical consumer orientation, followed by those identifying with the Left. The coefficients for SDP and Centre party are no longer significant in this model. However, what is surprising is that the effect of the Finns fails to be significant. Overall, these findings mean that adjusting for socio-demographic variables does not have much impact on the association with political identification, except for those who identify with the Finns. This finding gives us one further interpretation. It is indeed those with a preference for the NCP that report significantly lower ethical concern among all citizens.

Finally, we continued the modelling process by considering the demographic variation of ethical consumption across the party groups. According to this final procedure, we also found changes in party differences. In particular, the effects were visible to the NCP adherents that could not be distinguished as less ethical consumers after the interaction analysis.

A more detailed analysis of interactions revealed significant variations concerning party supporters' education and age. First, regarding the age effect, those with a preference for the Greens and the NCP were emphasized as their young adherents were more ethically oriented than other young respondents. When it comes to education, we found that those with a preference for Greens, who have completed secondary level education, were more ethically oriented when compared to others with the same level of education. Instead, NCP preference was emphasized alongside with the Finns supporters as they were clearly less ethically oriented among the highest level of education group.

However, the interaction analysis substantially increased the errors of party estimates, which means that all differences may not appear as statistically significant. Despite this, the findings confirm that socio-demographic characteristics have a notable role in how ethical consumer attitudes are expressed among citizens, and importantly, they are also related to party differences. Accordingly, we proceeded with the analysis in order to find out what has happened to ethical consumer orientation within party preference categories over time when demographic factors are considered.

The results of temporal analysis are shown in Figure 3. In general, the differences between parties have decreased. However, contrary to our expectations, adherents of the Greens remain strongly distinct from others. Even though the differences have narrowed, the difference between the Greens and others has remained statistically significant throughout the years.

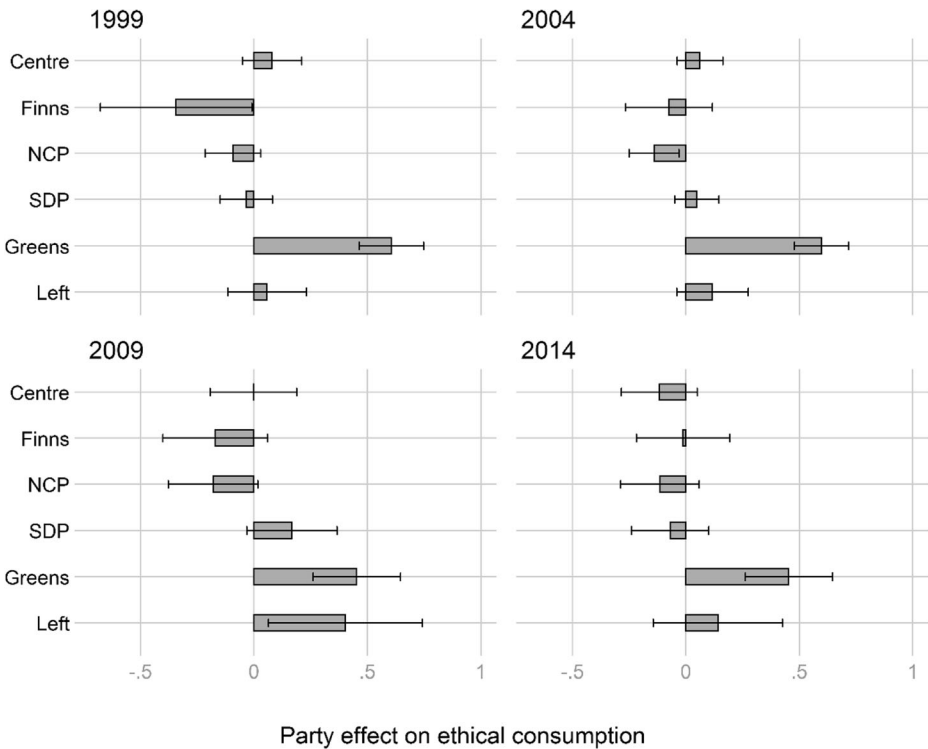


Fig. 3 Party effects on ethical consumption by year. Models controlling for temporal changes in the distribution of age, gender, education, income, and residence. Estimated regression coefficients with 95 % confidence intervals

What is also remarkable to note is the relative convergence between the right- and left-wing parties between the last two survey rounds.

Discussion

Our results showed that party preference plays a significant role when examining ethical consumer orientation. We hypothesized ethical consumer orientation would be most prevalent among those with a preference for the Greens and the Left (H1), most uncommon among those with a preference for the Finns (H2), and also rare among those who prefer the NCP (H3). Our results partly confirm these hypotheses. We found those with a preference for the Greens did indeed report the strongest ethical concern; however, the scores of those leaning towards the Left were not as strong as we would have expected considering the Left as a “new left” party that stresses global sustainability (Eskelinen 2015).

Interestingly, ethical consumer orientation was not weakest among those who had a preference for the Finns. Rather, it is the NCP adherents who exhibit the least ethical consumer orientation when socio-demographic factors are considered in the models. In this respect, the results reflect the traditional left–right division, in which the supporters of the left-wing and the right-wing parties differ significantly on economic issues, such as consumer preferences (Koivula et al. 2017).

Our fourth hypothesis was that socio-demographic factors have an effect on the association between political party preference and ethical consumer orientation (H4). This was confirmed as demographic factors had a considerable effect on the relationship between party identification and ethical consumer orientation. What is notable here is that associations between different party groups remained statistically significant even after controlling for key socio-economic and demographic variables. The results underline theories and findings that suggest personal political preference may be regarded as a powerful factor which manifests in behavioural and attitudinal patterns (e.g., Jacoby 1988; Koivula et al. 2017).

Finally, we hypothesized (H5) that the differences between the parties have narrowed during the surveyed years. This hypothesis was partly confirmed. The results indicate that ethical consumption has normalized and become mainstream in political debates and the differences between the left-wing and right-wing parties have narrowed. However, it was found that the supporters of the Greens are still clearly differentiated from the supporters of other parties with the highest scores on ethical consumer scores.

Generally speaking, political parties and their programmes have become increasingly homogeneous in Western democracies during last decades (Katz 2013). In Finland, this is true also regarding ecological issues: During 1980s and 1990s, all the biggest parties adapted ecological concerns to their programmes, yet the Greens still stood out by highlighting ecological threats in the core of its programme (Mickelsson 2012). In this respect, it was also interesting to note that the gap between the Greens and others has remained nearly unchanged. Despite the fact that the Greens has extended their political programme beyond environmental issues, the supporters still seems to report more ecological attitudes than the supporters of other parties.

A striking result, however, was that we did not find increased polarization between parties. All in all, it appears ethical consumer attitudes are less politically divided than they used to. Regarding consumption as a means for voicing environmental, ethical, and political concerns appears to have become palatable across the political spectrum. As Greens and Finns represent opposing views on post-material value issues (Westinen 2015, p. 229), we expected that the largest differences may be found between them, but our data showed little sign of the backlash of the populists. As a matter of fact, the adherents of the Finns have come close to the average consumer. In that sense, our observations were encouraging as the suggested polarization of Finnish citizens and political parties is not reflected in the citizens' consumer attitudes regarding important ethical issues. However, it will be an interesting point for further research to see whether the ethical consumer attitudes of Greens and the Finns will continue to converge or will start to diverge, as the counter-reaction hypothesis would presume.

Even though party supporters' ethical consumer attitudes in general converged over the period under review, the overall level of ethical consumer attitudes did not increase but rather decreased as compared to the year 1999. One possible explanation for this is that as the meanings of survey items may change over time, what counted as ethical consumption in 1999 may not be considered as equally ethical in the later years (Cherrier 2005). According to the results, it can be assumed that ethical consumption criteria have tightened over the years. On the other hand, ethical consuming attitudes do not necessarily correlate with the actual outputs of consumption (Young et al. 2010). For example, those who are highly educated might have relatively strong ethical consumer orientation yet have a heavy ecological footprint, e.g., due to frequent travelling.

The results of this study indicate that political party preference is a significant factor that should not be dismissed in researching ethical consumption. Although the social class structure and political party system have gone through upheavals, it seems that individuals' party preferences are still connected to their attitudes and, according to this study, also in terms of ethical consumption. While old parties may be unable to engage with many voters more interested in questions of new lifestyle-related and identity-based politics, new parties, such as the Greens, have emerged to patch up this gap. This makes the connection between party preference and consumption a relevant topic for further research.

Obviously, our study has its limitations. There are three particular restrictions that need to be taken into account. The first one deals with the specific cultural context of Finland and the second and third with our methodological strategy. The observations came from one Nordic country, which has a relatively distinct spectrum of political parties. In this sense, generalizations to other Western democracies are impossible to conduct. Secondly, we treated political party preference as an explanatory factor for ethical consumer orientation. While this is in line with the overall framework of your study, one could also argue that the direction of association goes the other way around. It is possible that individuals select their political preference on the basis of their consumer orientations. This would also serve as a logical explanation to the detected associations examined above. Finally, since our longitudinal data were obtained by cross-sectional sampling, the observations did not come from the same respondents in different points in time. In order to have more in-depth interpretations of multidimensionality manifesting between political party preference and ethical consumer orientation, the study should be repeated using longitudinal panel data.

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Appendix

Table 3 Descriptive statistics of control variables

	<i>M</i>	SD	Obs.
Age	46.7	15.89	8,314
Gender			
Man	0.45	0.5	8,424
Woman	0.55	0.5	
Education			
Primary	0.17	0.37	8,254
Secondary	0.42	0.49	
Tertiary	0.29	0.45	
Master	0.12	0.33	
Residential area			
Urban	0.77	0.42	8,281
Rural	0.23	0.42	
Main activity			
Working	0.54	0.50	8,386
Unemployed	0.07	0.25	
Education	0.08	0.28	
Retiree	0.25	0.43	
Other	0.06	0.24	
Income € (monthly after taxes)	1601.6	1680.5	7,703

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